Meditations for the Sick and Dying

Dharma Talk given by Thich Nhat Hanh on August 11, 1996 in Plum Village, France.

Today is the eleventh of August 1996, we are in the Lower Hamlet, and our Dharma talk will be in English. Today we are going to learn the practice of the four mantras, because this is the kind of practice that I would like everyone to bring home and do every day. It's very pleasant and it's easy. A mantra is a magic formula. Every time you pronounce a mantra, you can transform the situation right away; you don't have to wait. It is a magic formula you have to learn to recite when the time is appropriate. And the condition that makes it effective is your mindfulness, your concentration. It means that this mantra can only be recited when you are perfectly mindful and concentrated. Otherwise, it would not work. But you don't need to be mindful or concentrated one hundred percent; even eighty percent can produce a miracle. And we all are capable of being mindful and concentrated.

The first mantra is "Darling, I am here for you." I wish that children from Italy would practice it in Italian, French children would practice in French, Vietnamese in Vietnamese, and so on. We don't have to practice it in Sanskrit or Tibetan. Why do we have to practice this mantra, "Darling, I am here for you?" Because when you love someone, you have to offer him or her the best you have. And the best that you can offer your beloved one is your true presence. Your true presence is very important to him or to her.

I know a young man of eleven or twelve years old. One day his father asked him, "Tomorrow will be your birthday. What do you want? I'll buy it for you." The young man was not very excited. He knew that his father was a very rich person—the director of a large corporation—and he could afford to buy anything the young man wanted. He was extremely rich, so it was no problem at all to buy a birthday gift for his son. But the young man didn't want anything. He was not very happy, and not because he did not have many things to play with. He was not happy because his father was not with him—he was always absent. He never spent enough time at home. He traveled like an arrow. And what the young man needed the most was the presence of his father. He had a father, but it did not seem very clear that he had a father, because the father was so busy.

You know when someone is rich, he has try to work very hard in order to continue to be rich; that is the problem. Once you are rich, you cannot afford to be poor. That is why you have to use all your time and energy in order to work, work, work, day and night, in order to keep being rich. And I have seen many people like that. So the father does not have time for his children. Although the children in principle have a father, they don't really have one. What they need the most is the presence of their father beside them. So the young man did not know what to say. But finally he got enlightened. He said, "Daddy, I know what I want." "What?" And the father was waiting for an electric train, or something like that. The young man said, "I want you!" And it is very true, that children—if they don't have their father or their mother beside them—are not very happy. So what they want the most is the presence of the person they love.

When you love someone, the most precious gift you can make to him or her is your true presence. That is why you have to practice in such a way that you are there. You are there one hundred percent and you look at him or her, and you say, "Darling, I am really here for you." That is the greatest gift that we can make to our most beloved one. But this is not only a statement. You know a mantra is not a statement. A mantra is something you utter out of reality—that means you have to be there one hundred percent in order for what you say to

become a true mantra. So in order to be really there you need one minute or two of practice—you breathe in: “Breathing in, I am calm, breathing out, I smile. Breathing in, I am really here, breathing out, I’m really here.” You do that a few times, and suddenly you are really there. It’s wonderful. You are not caught with your problems, you are not caught with your projects, you are not caught by the future, or by the past. You are really there, available, to the person you love. Then when you are sure that you are truly there—body and mind together—you go in the direction of the person you love, and looking at him or her mindfully, knowing that that person is really there and you are there, you smile and you say, “Darling, I am here for you, I am really here for you.”

To many of us that is the greatest gift that we can make to our beloved one. If the father understood that, he would practice mindful breathing or walking for a few minutes, he would stop all his projects, he would cancel one of his meetings and just sit down, really close to his boy, and he would put his arm around the little boy, and look into the eyes of his boy and say, “Darling, this time I’m really here for you.” That is a very wonderful moment, that is a moment when life is really real and deep: father is there and son is there. Love is there because they are there for each other, they are available to each other. When you love someone, you have to make yourself available to the person you love. And this is the practice of meditation—to make yourself available one hundred percent as a gift to the person you love.

So I’d like the children to write that formula down on a sheet of paper in their own language, beautifully, and decorate it with flowers and fruits and birds. When you go home, you stick that mantra on your wall and you practice every day with the person you love. “Darling, I am really here for you,” that is the first mantra. My friends in America have painted that mantra on a tee-shirt. If you want, you might like to make a tee-shirt and paint that magic formula in Italian or French or German or Dutch. When you wear that tee-shirt, “Darling, I am here for you,” you might just look at that person and point to the mantra on your tee-shirt and smile.

The second mantra is, “Darling, I know you are there, and I am very happy.” This is also a very easy mantra to practice. Because to love means to acknowledge the presence of the person you love. In order to acknowledge that he is there or she is there, you have to have the time. If you are too busy, how can you acknowledge his or her presence? And the most important condition for doing this mantra is that you be there one hundred percent. If you are not there one hundred percent, you cannot recognize his or her presence. When you are loved by someone, you need that person to recognize that you are there—whether you are very young or seventy years old or eighty years old, you still behave the same way. We always need the other person to acknowledge that we are here. We want to be embraced by his or her attention. Not only children need that but adults also need that. We need to be embraced by the energy of mindfulness of the other person. So if you are there one hundred percent and you go to the other person, you look at him or her, you smile and you say, “Darling, I know you are there and I am very happy.” That is to recognize the presence of the person you love and to say that you are very happy that she is still alive, available to us at any time. You know such a practice can make the other person very happy right away—you don’t need to wait five minutes. That is the Buddhadharma—effective right away. If you are shy, you have to learn. You have to lock the door, turn the light off, and try to practice the mantra, “Darling, I know you are there, and I am very happy.” And when you are sure that you can do it, open the door and go to him or her and practice.

You know, I practice that not only with people, but I practice that with the moon, the Morning Star, the magnolia flowers. Last year when I went to Korea, I was housed in a Protestant seminary and my little house was surrounded by magnolias, and it was springtime. The magnolia blossoms were very beautiful. They are a white color—like snow. I practiced

walking meditation among the magnolia blossoms. I felt so happy, so wonderful. So I would stop and look closely at each magnolia flower. I smiled, breathed in and out and I said, "Darling, I know you are there, and I am very happy," and I bowed to the flower. I was very happy, and I thought that the magnolia flower was happy also, because when people recognize your presence and appreciate your presence, you feel that you are worth something. Of course, the magnolia flowers were very, very precious to me.

Sometimes I look at the full moon with mindfulness, I practice breathing in and out, and I tell the full moon the mantra: "Full moon, beautiful full moon, I know you are there, and I am very happy." And I was really happy at that moment. I was a free person—I was not assailed by worries or fear or any projects. And because I was free, I was myself. I had the time and opportunity to touch the wonders of life around me, and that is why I could touch the full moon and I practiced the mantra with the full moon. This afternoon you might like to practice the mantra with somebody, or just practice the mantra with a tree or a butterfly, because they are all wonderful.

We are in the meditation hall and all of us can hear the sound of the rain. To me the sound of the rain is something wonderful. In the Upper Hamlet we have a veranda baptized the "listening-to-the-rain" veranda. If you are a free person you only need to sit there and listen to the rain, and you can be very happy already, because the rain is something wonderful. I very often think of the rain as bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. After several weeks without rain, the vegetation begins to suffer and when the rain comes you can see that all the trees and bushes are very happy. I think they enjoy the sound of the rain, as I do, very much. Sitting in the meditation hall or sitting in the "listen-to-the-rain" veranda, you can appreciate the sound of the rain and you can be very happy just sitting there.

So happiness is possible with mindfulness, because mindfulness helps us to realize what is there—so precious. Those of us who still have a mother, we should be happy. Those of us who still have a father, we should be happy. Those of us who still have eyes in good condition to be able to look at the moon, we should be happy. There are many things that can make us happy now. And that is the practice of mindfulness—namely, the practice of Buddhist meditation. So please write down the second mantra on another sheet of paper in your best handwriting, and decorate it with colors—with flowers, fruits, leaves, birds, and so on, and hang it in your room. I am certain that if you practice the first and the second mantra, you will make many people around you very happy. And don't tell me that the practice is difficult—it is not.

[Bell]

The third mantra is also easy to practice. You practice this mantra when you see that the person you love suffers. She is crying, or he is crying. Or if they are not crying, they look very unhappy. If you claim to be a lover, then you have to know what is happening to the person you love, and mindfulness helps you to notice that something is wrong within that person. Of course, if you are there one hundred percent for him or for her, you will notice very soon that the person you love suffers. If you don't know that the person you love suffers, you are not mindful; you are not an ideal lover, because there is no mindfulness in you. Those of us who claim to be true lovers should practice mindfulness, we have to practice meditation, because how can you love if you are not there? You can only love when you are there and in order to be there you have to practice being there, whether by mindful breathing or mindful walking, or any kind of practice that can help you to be really there, as a free person, for the person you love. So because you are there, you are mindful—that is why you noticed that the person you love suffers. Right in that moment you have to practice deeply, to be there one

hundred percent. You go to him or to her, and you pronounce the third mantra, "Darling, I know you suffer, that's why I am here for you."

When you suffer, you want the person you love to be aware of your suffering—that's very human, that's very natural. You suffer, and if the other person you love does not know that you suffer, if he ignores your suffering, you suffer much more. So it would be a great relief if the person we love knows, is aware, that we are suffering. Therefore your task, your practice as a lover is to come to him or her to offer your true presence and utter the third mantra, "Darling, I know you suffer, that is why I am here for you." Before you can do anything to help, she suffers less already, because she knows that you are aware of her suffering. So the effect of the practice is instantaneous—quicker than if you make instant coffee—very quick. The more you are concentrated, the more you are mindfulness, the greater will be the effect of your practice. And children can practice this very well. Every time they see their brother or their sister suffer, every time they see Mommy crying, they should learn how to practice. They have to practice breathing in and out deeply and go to that person and take his hand or her hand and say, "Darling, I know you suffer and I'm here for you, really, I'm here for you." This a great relief.

The fourth mantra is only for adults because it's a little bit complicated. This third mantra, also, I would like you to write down in English, Italian, or German in your best writing style —calligraphy—and you should decorate it with a lot of love and care. Make it into a masterpiece. And don't wait until you are home to make it—I am asking you now to write down the three mantras here and decorate them very beautifully. When you go home, put them on the wall of your room or maybe in the living room—it's up to you. But my expectation is that you be able to practice them. And this is not the practice of children alone, this is the practice of everyone. Even if she is seventy or eighty, she still can practice; even if he is eighty he still can practice them and this can make a lot of happiness in the house. You try a few weeks, and you'll see—the situation in the home will be transformed very drastically. Communication is restored. We are concerned with the happiness and the sorrow and the suffering of every other member in the family. And of course this practice is easy, simple, and everyone can do it.

Now when you hear the small bell, please stand up and bow to the Sangha before you go out.

[Bell—children leave]

In the time of the Buddha there was a lay person whose name was Anathapindika. His real name was Sudatta. Anathapindika was a name given to him by the people in the city because they loved him. He had a good heart. He was a rich tradesman, business man, but he spent a lot of his time and money taking care of poor people, people who were abandoned, children, orphans, and so on. That is why the title "Anathapindika" was given to him by the people of his city Shravasti—it means "the person who takes care of the isolated ones, the unhappy ones," and so on. It was he who invited the Buddha to come and teach in his country. The Buddha before that stayed in the country of Magadha.

Anathapindika during one of his trips to Magadha found out about the presence of the Buddha. He was very greatly inspired by the teaching of the Buddha, that is why he invited the Buddha to his country, Kosala. And it is he who purchased the most beautiful park close to the city of Shravasti and offered it to the Buddha as a monastery—the first monastery in that country. Later on, it was called the Jeta Park, because the owner of the park had been the prince, whose name was Jeta. Anathapindika took great pleasure in serving the Buddha and the Sangha, and his family was a happy family because his wife and all the three children followed the teaching of the Buddha. But he was not given all the teachings of the Buddha,

because at that time people thought that lay people were too busy and should receive only the kind of teachings they could afford to do. So the deepest kind of teachings were only given to monks and nuns. It was Anathapindika who made it clear to the monks and nuns that there were lay people who were very capable of practicing the deepest teachings of the Buddha, and he said, "Please, Venerables, go back and tell the Lord that there are many lay people who are too busy and who cannot afford to learn and practice the deeper teaching of the Buddha, but there are among lay people those who are very capable of learning the practice and these teachings."

Anathapindika was very sick, he was about to die—this was after serving the Buddha for about thirty years. The Buddha went to him and visited with him, and after that he charged the Venerable Shariputra—one of his best disciples—to take care of Anathapindika. And one day Shariputra learned that Anathapindika was extremely sick—he might pass away at any time—so he went to the room of his younger brother in the Dharma, the Venerable Ananda, and asked him to come along for a visit. So both of them went to the house of Anathapindika.

When Anathapindika saw both of them coming, he was very glad. He tried to sit up but he was too weak; he could not. Shariputra said, "My friend, just remain where you are. You don't have to try hard to sit up, we will bring a few chairs and sit next to you." And after having said that, Shariputra asked, "Dear friend, Anathapindika, how do you feel in your body? Is the pain in your body increasing or decreasing?" And Anathapindika said, "Venerables, the pain in me is increasing all the time; I suffer very much, it does not decrease." And when Shariputra heard that he said, "Why don't we practice meditation on the Three Jewels? Let us practice breathing in and out and focus our attention on the wonderful Buddha, the wonderful Dharma, and the wonderful Sangha." And he offered guided meditation to Anathapindika and both of the monks also sat there and practiced together with the lay person who was dying. So, two monks supported a lay person practicing in this very crucial moment.

Shariputra was an extremely intelligent person. He was like the right hand of the Buddha, taking care of the community of monks, teaching many of them as a big brother, and he knew exactly what the dying Anathapindika needed. So he offered first of all meditation on the Three Jewels, because he knew very well that the greatest joy of Anathapindika was to serve the Buddha and the Sangha. He did everything to make the Buddha comfortable and the Sangha comfortable. Therefore meditating on the Buddha, on the Sangha, would bring joy and happiness that would counterbalance the pain in the body. All of us have to learn this, because in us there are seeds of suffering, there are seeds of joy. If you know how to touch the seeds of joy, they will be watered and the energy of happiness and joy will be strong enough to counterbalance—to make the person suffer less.

The Buddha is the one who has the capacity of being there, of being mindful, of being understanding, of being able to love and accept, of being joyful. There are the ten titles of the Buddha that people would repeat in order to touch those qualities—the joy and the peace of the Buddha.

After meditating on the Buddha, they meditated on the Dharma. The Dharma is a path that can bring relief and joy and peace to us right away—we don't need to wait. The Dharma is not a promise of happiness in the future. The practice of the Dharma is not a matter of time—as soon as you embrace the Dharma and practice, you begin to get relief and transformation right away.

And the Sangha is composed of members who practice concentration, mindfulness, wisdom, joy, and peace. To let your mind touch these wonderful jewels—that can water the seed of

happiness in you. After about ten minutes of practicing like that, Anathapindika felt much better already.

Next time when you sit close to a dying person, you might like to practice this same way. You are there, present one hundred percent, with stability, solidity, and peace. This is very important. You are the support of that dying person, and he or she needs very much your stability, your peace. To accompany a dying person, you need to be your best—don't wait until that moment to practice. You practice in your daily life to cultivate your peace, your solidity. Then you look into the person and you recognize the seeds of happiness that are buried deep in him or her, and you just water these seeds. Everyone has seeds of happiness. We should know in advance. And at that moment you talk to him or to her, you use guided meditation, in order to help him or her touch the seeds of happiness within him or her.

Several years ago I was on my way to lead a retreat in the northern part of New York state, and I learned that our friend Alfred Hassler was dying in a Catholic hospital nearby. So we managed to stop and spend some time with him. Alfred was very active during the Vietnam war. He was director of the Fellowship of Reconciliation in New York, and he supported us wholeheartedly in bringing the message of peace from the Vietnamese people, and he worked very hard to get a cease-fire and a negotiation between the warring parties. He was dying there, and I and Sister Chân Không and about six or seven of us were in a limousine, and we arranged so that we could stop. Only Sister Chân Không and I were allowed to go in; the rest were waiting in the car. When we arrived, Alfred was in a coma and Laura, his daughter, was trying to call him back, "Alfred, Alfred, Thây is here, Sister Chân Không is here!" But he didn't come back.

I asked Sister Chân Không to sing him a song—the song was written by me and the words are taken directly from the *Samyutta Nikaya*: "These eyes are not me, I am not caught in these eyes. I am life without boundaries, I have never been born, I will never die. Look at me, smile to me, take my hand. We say goodbye now, but we'll see each other right after now. And we'll meet each other on every walk of life."

Sister Chân Không began to sing softly that song. You might think that if Alfred was in a coma, he could not hear. But you must not be too sure, because after singing two or three times softly like that, Alfred came back to himself—he woke up. So you can talk to a person who is in a coma. Don't be discouraged, talk to him or to her as if he is awake. There is a way of communicating.

We were very happy that he recovered his consciousness and Laura said, "Alfred, you know that Thây is here with you, Sister Chân Không is here with you." Alfred was not able to speak. He was fed with glucose and things like that. He could not say any word, but his eyes proved that he was aware that we were there. I massaged his feet and I asked whether he was aware of the touch of my massage. When Laura asked, his eyes responded that he was aware that I was massaging his feet. When you are dying, you may have a very vague feeling of your body; you don't know whether exactly your body is there. So if someone rubs or massages your arms or feet, that will help, that will reestablish a kind of contact and awareness that the body is still there.

Sister Chân Không began to practice exactly like Shariputra; she began to water the seeds of happiness in Alfred. Although Alfred had not spent his time serving the Buddha, the Sangha, he had spent a lot of his time working for peace. So Sister Chân Không was watering the seeds of peace work in him. "Alfred do you remember the time you were in Saigon and were waiting to see the superior monk Tri Quang? Because of the American bombing, Tri Quang was not willing to see any Westerners. And you had a letter from Thây and you wanted to

deliver it to Tri Quang? You were not allowed to get in, so you sat down, outside his door, and you slipped under his door a message that you were going to observe a fast until the door was opened, and you did not have to wait long because just ten minutes after that, Tri Quang opened his door and invited you in? Do you remember that, Alfred?" And she tried to refresh the memories of these happy events.

"Alfred, do you remember that event in Rome where three hundred Catholic monks were demonstrating for peace in Vietnam? Each of them wore the name of a Buddhist monk in prison in Vietnam—because these Buddhist monks refused to be drafted into the army and obey the law of the army. Over here we tried our best to make their suffering known. So in Rome, three hundred Catholic priests wearing the names of three hundred Buddhist monks in jail in Vietnam made a parade, do you remember that?" All these kinds of memories came back to him.

Sister Chân Không continued to practice, exactly like Shariputra. At one point, Alfred opened his mouth and spoke. He said, "Wonderful, wonderful," two times, and that is all. One or two minutes later he sunk again into his coma and never came back again. Six people were waiting in the limousine and that night we had to give an orientation talk to four or five hundred retreatants, so I recommended to Laura and to Dorothy, his wife, that if he came back, they should continue the same kind of practice: massaging and watering the seeds of happiness in him. And we left.

[Bell]

In the early morning of the next day we got a telephone call that Alfred died very peacefully, just one hour or an hour and a half after we had left. It looks like he was waiting for us, and after that kind of meeting he was completely satisfied and he died in peace.

When Sister Chân Không's big sister was dying in California, she was suffering a lot in her body. In the hospital she was in a coma, but she suffered very much in her body; and she cried and she shouted, and all her children did not know what to do, because they had not learned anything from the Dharma yet. When Sister Chân Không came in and saw that, she began to chant. But her chanting was a little bit too weak compared with the moaning and crying of the person who was dying. So Sister Chân Không used a cassette recorder and a tape of the kind of chanting that you heard this morning, "Namo Avalokiteshvaraya, bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara." She used an earphone and she turned the volume quite high. In just a few minutes, all the agitation, all the suffering, all the crying stopped, and from that moment until she died, she remained very quiet.

It was like a miracle, and all of her children did not understand why, but we understand. Because she also had the seed of the Buddha-dharma in her, she had heard the chanting, she had had contact with the practice—the chanting, the atmosphere of the practice. But because of having lived too many years in an environment where the atmosphere of calm, of peace, was not available, many layers of suffering had covered it up, and now the chanting helped her although she was in a coma. The sound broke through and helped her touch what was deep in her. Because of that miracle of linking with the seed of peace and calm within her, she was able to quiet all her agitation and crying and she stayed very calm until she died.

So every one of us has that kind of seed in us—seeds of happiness, seeds of peace and calm. If we know how to touch them, we can help a dying person to die peacefully. We have to be our best during that time—we have to be calm, solid, peaceful, and present in order to help a person dying. The Buddhist practice of touching the Ultimate should be practiced in our daily life—we should not wait until we are about to die in order to practice. Because if we know

how to practice touching deeply the phenomenal world in our daily life, we are able to touch the world of the Absolute, the ultimate dimension of reality in our daily life. When you drink your cup of tea, when you look at the full moon, when you hold the hand of a baby, or walk with a child, if you do it very deeply, mindfully, with concentration, you are able to touch the ultimate dimension of reality, and this is the cream of the Buddhist teaching—touching the Ultimate.

The other day we talked about the wave, living the life of a wave, but at the same time she can also live the life of water within her. She does not have to die in order to become water, because the wave is water already in the present moment. Each of us has our ultimate dimension—you may call it "the kingdom of God," or *nirvana*, or anything. But that is our ultimate dimension—the ultimate dimension of our reality. If in our daily life we live superficially, we cannot touch it. But if we learn how to live our daily life deeply, we'll be able to touch nirvana—the world of no birth and no death—right in the here and the now. That is the secret of the practice that can help us transcend the fear of birth and death.

After having guided Anathapindika to practice watering the seeds of happiness in him, the Venerable Shariputra continued with the practice of looking deeply: "Dear friend Anathapindika, now it is the time to practice the meditation on the six sense bases. Breathe in and practice with me, breathe out and practice with me. These eyes are not me, I am not caught in these eyes. This body is not me, I am not caught in this body. I am life without boundaries. The decaying of this body does not mean the end of me. I am not limited to this body."

So they continued to practice, in order to abandon the idea that we are this body, we are these eyes, we are this nose, we are this tongue, we are this mind. They meditated also on the objects of the six senses: "Forms are not me, sounds are not me, smells are not me, tastes are not me, contacts with the body are not me; I am not caught in these contacts with the body. These thoughts are not me, these notions are not me, I am not caught in these thoughts and in these notions." And they meditated on the six consciousnesses: sight, hearing, consciousness based on nose, consciousness based on tongue, consciousness based on body, consciousness based on mind: "I am not caught in consciousness based on the body. I am not caught in consciousness based on the mind."
Then they meditated on the six elements: "The element of earth in me is not me, I am not caught in the earth element. The element of water in me is not me, I am not caught in the element of water." Then they went on with the elements of air, space, fire, and consciousness.

Finally they came to the meditation of being and non-being, coming and going. "Dear friend Anathapindika, everything that is arises because of causes and conditions. Everything that is has the nature not to be born and not to die, not to arrive and not to depart."

When we look at this sheet of paper, you might think that there is a moment when the sheet of paper began to be and there will be a moment when this sheet of paper will stop being.
We think that before we were born we did not exist, and we think that after we die we might become nothing. Because in our mind we have the idea that to be born means "from nothing we suddenly become something." From no one you suddenly become someone—that is our notion of birth. But how is it possible that from nothing something could become something, from no one they could become someone? That is very absurd.

Look at this sheet of paper—we may think that the moment of its birth is when the paste was made into this sheet of paper. But this sheet of paper was not born out of nothing! If we look deeply into this piece of paper, we see already that it had been there before its "birth" in the form of a tree, in the form of water, in the form of sunshine, because with the practice of

looking deeply we can see the forest, the earth, the sunshine, the rain—everything in there. So the so-called "birthday" of the sheet of paper is only a "continuation day." The sheet of paper had been there for a long time in various forms. The "birth" of the sheet of paper is only a continuation. We should not be fooled by the appearance. We know that the sheet of paper has never been born, really. It has been there, because the sheet of paper has not come from nothing. From nothing, you suddenly become something? From no one, you suddenly become someone? That is very absurd. Nothing can be like that.

So the day of our birth is only a continuation day and practicing meditation is to look deeply into ourselves to see our true nature. That means, our true nature is the nature of no birth and no death. No birth is our true nature. We used to think that to be born means from nothing we become something. That idea, that notion is wrong, because you cannot demonstrate that fact. Not only this sheet of paper, but that flower, this book, this thermos, they were something else before they were "born." So nothing is born from nothing. The French scientist Lavoisier said, "*Rien ne se crée*,"nothing is produced. There is no birth. The scientist is not a teacher of Buddhism, but he made a sentence exactly with the same kind of words that are found in the Heart Sutra. *"Rien ne se crée, rien ne se perd,"* nothing is produced, nothing dies.

Let us try to burn this sheet of paper to see whether we can reduce it into nothing. Maybe you have a match or something? Be mindful and observe. . . . We know that it is impossible to reduce anything into nothing. You have noticed the smoke that came up. Where is it now? Part of the sheet of paper has become smoke, it has joined a cloud. We may see it again tomorrow in the form of a raindrop. That's the true nature of the sheet of paper. It is very hard for us to catch the coming and the going of a sheet of paper. We recognize that part of the paper is still there, somewhere in the sky in the form of a little cloud. So we can say, "So long, goodbye, see you again tomorrow."

It's hot when I burn it—I got a lot of heat on my fingers. The heat that was produced by the burning has penetrated into my body and into yours also. It has come into the cosmos, and if you have a very sophisticated instrument, you can measure the effect of that heat on everything, even several kilometers from here. So that is another direction where the sheet of paper has gone. It is still there, in us and around us. We don't need a long time to see it again. It may be already in our blood. And this ash, the young monk may return it to the soil and maybe next year when you try a piece of lettuce, it is the continuation of this ash.

So it is clear that you cannot reduce anything to nothing, and yet we continue to think that to die means from something you become nothing, from someone you just become no one. Is it possible? So the statement, *"Rien ne se crée, rien ne se perd,"* nothing is really born, nothing can die, goes perfectly with the teaching of the Buddha on the nature of no birth, and no death. Our fear is born from notions—the notions of being and non-being, the notions of birth and death. Before we were born we are taught that that was "non-being," after we are born we believe that that is "being," and after we die we think that that will be "non-being" again. So not only do the notions of birth and death imprison us in our fear but the notions of being and non-being have to be transcended. That is the cream of the Buddhist teaching—to silence all the notions and ideas, including notions of birth and death, being and non-being.

What is Nirvana? Nirvana is the blowing out of all notions, the notions that serve as the foundation of fear and suffering. The other day we were dealing with the notion of happiness. Even the notion of happiness can make us miserable, can create a lot of misery for us. That is one of the notions that should be transcended. There are basic notions that are the foundation of our fear and suffering: the notions of being and non-being, birth and death, coming and going. From where have you come and where shall we go? The idea of coming and going is also a notion that we have to transcend.

[Bell]

This is the guided meditation given to Anathapindika by Shariputra: Everything that is has the nature not to be born and not to die. No birth and no death. Not to arrive and not to depart. No coming, no going. When the body arises, it arises; it does not come from anywhere. When the body ceases, it ceases; it does not go anywhere. The body is not nonexistent before it arises. The body is not existent after it arises. When conditions are sufficient there is a manifestation, and if you perceive that manifestation, you qualify it as being. If conditions are no longer sufficient, you cannot perceive it, and you qualify it as non-being. You are caught in these two notions.

It's like if you come to Plum Village in April and you look, you see no sunflowers. Looking around you say that there are no sunflowers around here. That is not true. The sunflower seeds have been sown. Everything is ready by that time. Only the farmers and their friends, when they look at the hills around Plum Village, already can see sunflowers. But you are not used to it—you have to wait until the month of July in order to recognize, to perceive sunflowers. So if out of your perception, you qualify it as "being" or "non-being"—well, you miss the reality. Not being perceived by you doesn't make it non-being, nonexistent. Just because you can perceive it, doesn't mean that you can qualify it as existing and being. It is a matter of causes and conditions. If conditions are sufficient, then it is apparent, and you can perceive it; and because of that, you say that it "is."

That is why, in deep meditation, we have to transcend all these ideas, all these notions, and we can see what other people cannot see. Looking into the flower you can see the garbage, you can see the cloud, you can see the soil, you can see the sunshine. Without much effort, you can see that a flower "inter-is" with everything else, including the sunshine and the cloud. We know that if we take away the sunshine or the cloud, the flower will be impossible. The flower is there because conditions are sufficient for it to be; we perceive it and we say, "Flower exists." And when these conditions have not come together, and you don't perceive it, and then you say, "It's not there." So we are caught by our notions of being and non-being. The ultimate dimension of our reality cannot be expressed in terms of being and non-being, birth and death, coming and going.

It is like the water that is the substance of the waves. Talking about the wave, you can speak of the "birth" of a wave, the "death" of a wave. The wave can be "high" or "low," "this" or "other," "more" or "less" beautiful: but all these notions and terms cannot be applied to water, because the water is the other dimension of the waves. So the ultimate dimension of our reality is in us, and if we can touch it, we'll transcend the fear of being and non-being, birth and death, coming and going. For Buddhist meditators, "to be or not to be," that is *not* the question! Because they are capable of touching the reality of no birth and no death; no being, no non-being. You have to transcend both concepts—being and non-being—because these concepts constitute the foundation of your fear.

It would be a pity if we practiced only to get the relative kind of relief. The greatest relief is possible only when you touch nirvana. Nirvana means the ultimate dimension of our being, in which there is no birth, no death, no being, no non-being. All these notions are entirely removed. That is why nirvana means "extinction"—the extinction of all notions and concepts, and also the extinction of all suffering that is born from these concepts, like fear, like worries. When we begin to touch the phenomenal world, we see there is birth, there is death, there is impermanence, there is no-self. But as we begin to touch profoundly the world of phenomena, we find out that the base of everything is nirvana. Not only are things impermanent, but they are permanent as well. You transcend the idea of permanence, and you also transcend the idea

of impermanence. Impermanence is given as an antidote so that you can release your notion of permanence. And since you are caught by the idea of self, no-self is a device to help you to get release from the notion of self. Touching the Absolute, not only can you release the notion of self, but you can also release the notion of non-self. If you have a notion of nirvana, please do your best to release it as soon as possible—because nirvana is the release of all notions, including the notion of nirvana!

Anathapindika was a very able practitioner. When he practiced to this point, he was so moved that he got insight right away. He was able to touch the dimension of no-birth and no-death. He was released from the idea that he is this body. He released the notions of birth and death, the notions of being and non-being, and suddenly he got the non-fear. The Venerable Ananda saw him crying because of happiness, because of that kind of release. But Ananda did not understand what was really happening with the lay person Anathapindika, so he said, "Why, dear friend, why are you crying? Do you regret something, or did you fail in your practice of the meditation?" He was very concerned. But Anathapindika said, "Lord Ananda, I don't regret anything. I practiced very successfully." Then Ananda asked, "Why are you crying, then?" Anathapindika said, "Venerable Ananda, I cry because I am so moved. I have served the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha for more than thirty years, and yet I have not received any teaching that is deep like today. I am so happy to have received and practiced this teaching." And Ananda said, "Dear friend, this kind of teaching we monks and nuns will receive every day."

You know that Ananda was much younger than Shariputra. Thereupon Anathapindika said, "Venerable Ananda, please go home and tell the Lord that there are lay people who are so busy that they cannot receive this kind of deep teaching, but there are those of us, although lay people, who do have the time, the intelligence, and the capacity of receiving this kind of teaching and practice." And those were the last words uttered by the lay person Anathapindika. The Venerable Ananda promised to go back to the Jeta grove and report that to the Buddha, and it is reported in the sutra that not long after the departure of the two monks, the layman Anathapindika died peacefully and happy.

This is a sutra, a discourse called "The Teachings to be Given to the Sick." You can find it in the *Plum Village Chanting Book*, in English. We are working on a new version of the *Plum Village Chanting Book*, but in the present edition you already have this text. This text is available in Pali, in Chinese, and we have several other texts which offer the same kind of teaching. So I would recommend that we study this text and we do a Dharma discussion in order to deepen our understanding of the teaching, and how to put into practice this teaching of the Buddha in the best way possible.

If you are a psychotherapist, if you are a social worker, if you are the one who has to help a dying person, it's very crucial that you study this kind of teaching and put it into your practice in your daily life. And if you are simply a meditator who would like to deepen your practice, then the study and practice of this sutra will help you to get more stability, get more peace, and especially the ground of non-fear, so that when the moment comes, you can confront it in a very calm and easy way—because all of us are supposed to die some day. Even if theoretically in the teaching there is no birth and no death, if we are able to live our daily life in such a way that we could touch the ultimate dimension, then that moment will not be a problem for us at all.

In my daily life I always practice looking at things around me, at people around me, at myself; and I can already see my continuation in this flower, or that bush, or that young monk, or that young nun or that young lay person. I see that we belong to the same reality, we are doing our best as a Sangha, we bring the seeds of the Dharma a little bit everywhere, we

make people around us happy: so I don’t see the reason why I have to die, because I can see myself in you, in other people, in many generations. That is why I have promised the children that I will be climbing the hill of the twenty-first century with them.

From the top of the hill in the year 2050, I’ll be looking down and enjoying what is there together with the young people now. The young monk Phap Canh is now twenty-one, and on the top of the hill he will be seventy-five! And of course I will be with him, hand in hand, and we will look down together to see the landscape of the twenty-first century. So as a Sangha, we shall climb the hill of the twenty-first century together. We’ll do our best so that the climbing will be enjoyable and peaceful, and we’ll have all the children with us because we know that we never die. We will be there for them forever